

WHEN MEMORY MEETS THE PAST: ARCHAEOLOGY AND AMNESIA¹

Cultural or collective memory (also known as ‘social memory’) has become one of the major themes of the last fifty years. The concept originated within sociology, but has more recently taken in psychology and history (see especially Zerubavel 2003) to become an interdisciplinary area of investigation (see Middleton and Edwards 1990). Its particular value is in its recognition not only that the past is always created rather than simply recorded, but also that it serves to create and sustain identity. Thus, while its effects seem to be of reproducing the past, its function is in truth orientated towards the present, to which the past is constantly adjusting itself. Studies of cultural memory emphasize that the phenomenon includes not only genuine recollection of the past but also addition and deletion—that is, the creation of ‘false’ memories’ and the forgetting of ‘true’ ones.²

The concept of cultural memory has proved extremely fruitful to the biblical scholar and the history of Judaism itself has provided one of the most eloquent examples of the power of cultural memory to create and sustain a strong ethnic identity (see Assmann 1992; Zerubavel 2005; for the classical period, Mendels 2004, Mendels [ed.] 2007; Yerushalmi 1996 on ‘Jewish memory’). The creation of the State of Israel is itself the culmination of centuries of Jewish memory and yet paradoxically it has also caused problems and issued challenges to that memory. In this essay I want to focus on two of these challenges: the conflict between a ‘biblical’ or ‘Zionist’ archaeology and a

¹ I am especially indebted to Eric Meyers for his lecture, ‘Collective Memory: The Case of Archaeology and National Parks and the Issue of Cultural Patrimony’ at the *European Association of Biblical Studies* Conference in Lisbon, August 2008, for providing me with a copy and permitting me to use its contents.

² The classic formulation of the concept is by Halbwachs, which he seems to have derived under the influence of Durkheim. According to Halbwachs, individual memory is not possible outside society.

secular, 'post-Zionist' archaeology, and the problem of reconciling allegiance to cultural memory with responsibility both to 'real' history and to the cultural memories of others. In a way, both of these result from the collision of the people who understand themselves as 'Israel' with a land they understand as 'Israel'. The two do not sit so easily together.

1. Biblical mythology and the imprinting of Jewish memory

To the historian the power of cultural memory in the formation and sustenance of national and social identities must be acknowledged and studied as an important motivation of subsequent historical action. Embedded images and narratives of the past, however, must be distinguished from documented history and the relationship between memory and events analyzed, not only to ascertain the historical data themselves but also to appreciate the mechanisms, motives and consequences of the transformations made by memory. This distinction is normally quite straightforward but can be obstructed by the powerful forces of religion and/or nationalism, for which cultural memory is often inalienable and can become an issue of loyalty. The recent conflict in Northern Ireland, for example, despite its provocation in political and economic discrimination, rests ultimately on a combination of postcolonial resentment and religious antagonism.

The two most important episodes in the cultural memory of Judaism and inscribed in the Bible are the Exodus and the Exile. When combined in memory they invoke Israel as a nation separated from its promised land and in captivity, and then restored. This paradigm, has been powerfully invoked in recent history through Zionist resettlement in Palestine and the ideology (and law) of 'Jewish Return'.³ The doubts among contemporary

³ The effect of the *Shoah* is obviously not to be discounted, but the Zionist movement predates this, as does the Mandatory policy of establishing a Jewish 'homeland'.

Jewish historians and archaeologists about the historicity of an ‘Exodus’ (e.g. Herzog, 1999) and the accuracy of the myth of universal Jewish exile (Sand 2005) invite the historian to address them as important elements of cultural memory rather than as historical events. In the case of the Exodus, periodic migrations and expulsions of people from Syria-Palestine into and out of Egypt are well-attested, and provide a basis for the story. Moreover, tales of a single incident that led to the settling of Jews in Palestine are shared between Jews and Egyptians—as the accounts of both Hecataeus and Manetho show (for the arguments, see Davies 2001)—and we may thus witness the sometimes polemical negotiation of this cultural memory between different groups.

The memory of the prototypical Exile, from Judah to Babylonia, is likewise somewhat different from the actual events, as can be deduced from the biblical accounts themselves. Despite the implication that all the inhabitants of Judah were taken and the land left ‘desolate’ (e.g. 2 Chron. 36:20-21) it is obvious that many Judeans were left behind, and continued to live under a Neo-Babylonian regime. Nor was the former kingdom of Israel denuded of all its previous inhabitants: ‘Israelites’ remained there, too, and the Samaritan sect is a direct product of that society. But the topos of ‘Exile’, broadened to include the expulsion of Judeans by Hadrian in the second century BCE, has expanded into a wider myth that the Jewish diaspora was a universally involuntary process rather than, as was evidently the case, to a large degree the result of economic migration and proselytizing outside Judah.

But the divergence between ‘memory’ and ‘history’ is not necessarily a direct conflict. Cultural memory works in its own way and to its own ends, and the myths that it can promote have their own validity. It is not a matter of reproach that the British, the Americans and Russians all think they won the Second World War and could have won it without the aid of the others. Closer to biblical matters: many educated Jews and Christians are

perfectly aware that much of the Christmas or Passover story are not reliable history. But the memory allows participation in a shared identity and even to some extent a shared worldview.

Professional historians, then, have long been aware of the vagaries of what used to be called 'tradition' (which is not exactly the same as 'cultural memory', though the two are often confused), and even among non-historians such an awareness is fairly widespread. But the stories about the past contained in the Bible have proved a particularly difficult exception. I suggested earlier that while Jewish memories of the biblical past have functioned for centuries to maintain Jewish existence and identity, the collision between these memories and the land in which they are located has proved controversial. That conflict has occurred above all in within the discipline of archaeology.

2. Inventing history

It is hardly a controversial opinion that the State of Israel has used archaeology to serve political ends, demonstrating that the new 'land of Israel' had once been a Jewish homeland and reinforcing the ideology of a 'return', even after 2000 years (see e.g. Shavit 1997; Abu El-Haj 2001; Kletter 2005). The excavation of Hazor by Yigael Yadin in 1955-58 (see Yadin 1975) was undertaken in part if not mostly for the purpose of bringing to light the traces of that conquest that whose historicity was already being questioned, and the parallels between the exploits of Joshua and this military archaeologist were made very clear. However, the story of Joshua is not simply about conquest but about the displacement of one population and one culture by a quite different one, and this aspect of the 'memory' cannot be detached from the whole. For whatever the arguments about a policy of population transfer (Morris 1999; Pappé 2007), Israel has embarked on a thorough 'Judaizing' of its territory. This is of course defensible: but rather more dubious is the effect of Judaizing the entire history of the land. The issue is of ownership of the past: 'patrimony'.

The relationship between the biblical ‘memories’ and the archaeological record’s biblical ‘memories’ is a well-known issue, and it continues to foment high controversy. Alongside excavations and surveys undertaken to discover objectively the history of the land are many others, richly funded by individuals and institutions intent on maximizing Jewish patrimony of the past, including the verification of the biblical accounts. In many cases the recovery of that Jewish past, however, entails the exclusion or even denial of the past that belongs to others. At one level, disagreements of interpretation over specific issues are illuminating and instructive. Thus, for example, over the identity and the dating of the ‘large stone structure’ in Jerusalem, discovered by Eilat Mazar (Mazar 2006) there is a huge difference of up to 800 years between the dates assigned to the most of the structure (see Finkelstein *et al* 2007). But quite apart from such genuine disagreement there are obvious dangers in implicating a supposedly scientific discipline in the service of colonizing the past.

As Eric Meyers recently put it (2008)

‘[S]ome places transcend individual historic concerns and simply have a more universal appeal such as Jerusalem, even Petra, or places like Athens or Rome. And this raises the question of whose cultural patrimony a particular site might encompass, not so much in a legal sense but whose culture can lay claim to its ruins and finds and whether as some have argued, such finds and such sites really do belong to a more inclusive, universal group of humanity.

Meyers points to the status of ‘multicultural’ sites where, for example, as is often the case in Israel, Greco-Roman (pagan), Jewish, Christian, and Muslim coexist. In such cases the remains also belong not merely to the site but to the different cultural memories that Jews, Muslims and Christians may attach to the site itself. Such memories, of course, belong to the ‘interpretation’ the artifacts and will inevitably shape the way in which they are presented.

It is of course understandable that a nation seeks above all to conserve and display its own history as revealed through archaeological and archival research. But the issue is to what extent that presentation serves cultural memory or how far it represents objectively the history of the land. Meyers's own experience in Sepphoris, for example, has been that the National Parks Authority has almost entirely neglected the extensive Arab and Christian presence at the site, despite the attempts of the excavators to present the history even-handedly.

The case of Silwan is more extreme. In the 1990s, the 'City of David' archaeological garden (which is part of the Jerusalem Walls national park) was transferred to the management of Elad (*'el 'ir david*: 'to the city of David'), a private organization which aims to displace the Arab population of the town with Jewish settlers. Elad controls about a dozen excavations in the Old City of Jerusalem, and Elad has been buying and expropriating houses in Palestinian neighbourhoods for many years, with the tacit approval of the Jerusalem mayoralty. It is promoting the idea that the 'City of David' would preclude the presence in this area of any other people even though they may have been there for centuries. Open areas, roads and paths that had served village residents in the past have been converted in recent years into excavation zones that are closed to the residents, and tunnels and trenches are being dug under their houses.

Such a project has been vigorously opposed both within and outside Israel, but despite a high Court ruling that the management of the archaeological area should be handed to a neutral group, this has not been done. The role of the Israel Antiquities Authority in ceding such responsibility is unclear, but the tourist center in the City of David and all that is within it is also run and administered by Elad and not by the IAA, not by the National Parks Authority, not by the municipality of Jerusalem, and the IAA takes in a huge sum of money as a result of having agreed to these conditions. In order to walk through the Shiloah Tunnel, visitors today must pay NIS 23, most of which goes to

Elad. This means that every tourist brought through the tunnel is financing the displacement of the local residents.

It is one thing to recover a Jewish past from an area settled by non-Jews; it is quite another to use archaeological activity as a way of imposing an imagined past as part of a concerted strategy of 'ethnic cleansing'. The recovery of the Jewish past—energetically sponsored by the Israeli state and by overseas individuals and institutions—has been an enormous success, but it has in many cases resulted in the effacing of centuries of non-Jewish history of the land.

An alternative archaeological tour in ancient Jerusalem has been organized that is intended to present the history of the area in a fuller and more just manner. This group represents the past of Jerusalem in conjunction with the lives of residents of the village in the present. Members of this group believe that the past of Jerusalem, like the past of every place, does not belong to any specific person or group. The past belongs, in their view to all residents and to all who visit the site. The Silwan conflict is the most extreme example of the clash between a set of cultural memories being not only claimed as history, but used to justify those who represent the memory of a non-Jewish past, which has therefore to be effaced.

The great Jewish memories of Exodus, conquest and Return from Exile all carry some implication for the destruction of others, whether Canaanites, or those Judeans who were not deported from the land. Likewise, the establishment of the State of Israel meant the dis-establishment of other peoples and structures. A legitimate celebration of Jewish cultural identity does not have to mean the removal of non-Jewish history from the land that, after all, has been non-Jewish for far longer than Jewish. The longing for Zion sustained Jewish hope for two thousand years; but now that this longing has been fulfilled, and the land possessed in reality, it is necessary to realize that the 'land of Israel' has also been, and still is, also the land of others.

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